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On the ends of universalism

Abstract: Starting with the times of Napoleon Bonaparte and the nexus between European universalism and imperialism, ending with the 1989 scenario and its global implications, this essay analyses the ends of European universalism. It does so in a double sense by addressing its interests and objectives, as well as the end of its legitimation in the times we live in. Through a montage of historical and philosophical constellations from 1769 to 2019, ranging from Goethe and Champollion to Max Lingner and Frantz Fanon, Alain Mabanckou and Camille de Toledo, it seeks to understand the promises and hopes that universalism was carrying, as well as the deceptions and losses that were caused by its epistemic implication in power relations. The history of universal progress entails a dialectics of contestation and provincialisation, both in a European and in a global perspective. If 1989 has left us with an end of utopia, then we need to understand this history to draw hope for a minor universality.

Keywords: universalism; ideology; dialectics of modernity; nationalism; socialism; the West, global history; Napoleon; Valmy (French and Algerian); Thebes; the Louvre; Berlin Wall; experience(s); *tristezza*/hope; universality

Introduction

In the post-1989 era, our perception of the world has principally changed. We cannot think of the world without thinking at it as a whole. However deep we conceive of processes of globalisation in world history (cf. the propositions by Bernstein 2009 or Schüttpelz 2009), there is a shared assumption today that their dynamic has generated, since the late 20th century, an awareness of living in a specifically global condition.¹ But paradoxically, the circulation and entanglements of persons, data, and goods do not necessarily generate a universalising awareness (Spivak 2003; D’hulst 2016) – as has become evident, throughout the last years, by cultural, identitarian, and relativistic rollbacks all over the world. Nothing has

¹ See for many Appadurai (1996; 2002; 2013), Ette (2009a), Moyn and Sartori (2013), Hunt (2014), Osterhammel (2015), Conrad (2016).

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illustrated more clearly than the Covid-19 pandemic that borders do not belong to the past. Everywhere, borders were closed even to those being in the greatest need, as it happened, for instance, at the European-Turkish borders in March 2020. Nationalism is still the great populist temptation when it comes to the question of how populations and societies conceive of their relation to the world. With regard to these developments, the boundaries of economic and media-theoretical conceptualisations of globalisation, which often stress the flattening of barriers and suspension of restrictions, become visible (Ette 2016; Mbembe 2020a, 151–171).

Since Early Modern times, one of the strongest arguments against relativistic and nationalistic thinking was a universalist anthropology: If all humans are of the same nature by birth, and if all are rational animals, humankind needs to be thought in a global perspective in terms of freedom, equality, and solidarity. The Enlightenment would transform this perspective into a philosophy of history and politicise these ideas so they were able to carry social change.² Once they were in the world, they could be claimed by everyone. The Haitian Revolution and the way the French Revolutionaries struggled with the legitimacy of slavery are early examples of this (Buck-Morss 2000; Lüsebrink 2000). They also demonstrate that the problem became one of knowing who had the power to decide upon how universal claims shall be realised. Within a civilising pretension, universalism was flattened into an ideology of Progress, which did not care about the historical struggles and complexity in which it had been concretely developed (Lilti 2019). For some time now, it has become evident that the proclaimed European universalism has indeed not been universal, but followed rather the European temptation to universalise its own beliefs, norms, and interests.³ For long, (Christian) solidarity denoted a brotherhood amongst (white) men, excluding women, and also excluding all those who were subject to interests of power. Freedom and equality were not for everybody. In 1914, at the climax of European imperialism, European and North American nation states had universalised themselves into nearly the entire world by creating regimes of standardisation, colonial exploitation and brutal oppression, which are still latent and structuring contemporary relations on a planetary scale (Glissant 1996; Mbembe 2013a, 2016). The necessity – and possibility – to differentiate human rationality from European “hyper-

² One of the most remarkable expressions of this is still Voltaire’s entry “Patrie” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, where he criticises the will to oppress others for one’s own advantage as a fundamental part of the *conditio humana* to which he opposes, in a sober, but utopian statement, the “citizen of the universe” [“citoyens de l’univers”] (Voltaire 1964 [1764], 307–308).

³ See for instance Césaire (2016 [1956]), Said (1978), Lévi-Strauss (2011 [1987]), Walzer (1989), Habermas (1999), Spivak (2004), Wallerstein (2006), Malhotra (2011).

rationalism” (cf. Chakrabarty 2010, 98–111) has therefore been revindicated since the early stages of the European imperial project.⁴

Today, European universalism, as an ideology, has come to an end in a double sense: on the one hand, anti-colonial thought and critical studies (in a wider sense) have demonstrated its entanglement with capitalism and Western imperialism, which has largely affected and ‘provincialised’ its political legitimation; on the other hand, the so-called ‘West’ is itself in a deep struggle for the social achievements of modernity, as neo-nationalist and neo-racist movements seek to sweep away its universal value. Moreover, the collapse of the so-called ‘East’ also marked an end to European universalism. If communism was compromised for profound reasons, discussions about what a social modernity could be in the 21st century not only have to respond to the radical relativism of parts of postmodern criticisms, but also to nationalist temptations. These can be understood, despite the official internationalism of the communist states, as part of the real communist politics since its very beginning and especially in the ‘communist block’ after 1945.

The need to refabricate universality is one of the great tasks of our times in order to overcome nationalist epistemologies (Beck and Grande 2010; Thomas-Fogiel 2015; Cassin 2016; Sarr and Savoy 2018) and political chauvinism (Balibar 2016; Jullien 2016; Messling 2016a; Diagne and Amselle 2018). In this process of re-fabricating universality however, not only the dialectics of Europe’s provincialisation as a relativisation of modernity needs to be considered (Al-Azm 2019). Furthermore, an emergent sense of humanity needs to be questioned from a truly worldwide perspective: Aspects of relation, inequality, and reparation are absolutely crucial here as they are put forward by the former so called ‘margins’ of the imperial empires (Spivak 2003; Gilroy 2010; Miano 2012; Mabanckou 2016; Mbebe 2016; Hofmann and Messling 2017; Messling 2019). If we are to conceive of a meaningful sense of universality *after* European universalism, we need to interrogate the latter: What were the sources and emancipating “weapons of criticism” of a European universalism?⁵ How was it linked to the dialectics of modernity, and how did it become an ideology? Where were its concrete historical failures? What are the costs of dismissing its argumentative plausibilities?

⁴ Cf. Ette (2009b), Buck-Morss (2009), Messling (2015; 2017).

⁵ These include Marxism and Liberalism. This formulation is taken from the preface to the collection of essays published in German as *Europa als Provinz. Perspektiven postkolonialer Geschichtsschreibung* (Chakrabarty 2010, 12) – which is not identical with the book *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Chakrabarty 2000). The German preface was specifically written for this volume; the term “weapons of criticism” appears as such in the English manuscript. We are grateful to *Campus* publishers for the information.

2019: a moment in time

The year 2019 was characterised by the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. The remembrance of the fall of the iron curtain that had divided post-war Europe in two distinct hegemonic spheres and ideological orders, coincided with another event of global importance that found much less, practically no, attention: Napoleon Bonaparte's 250th anniversary. However, the historical and philosophical dimension of the coexistence of these two circumstances cannot be neglected: Napoleon's appearance on the scene of world history marks the uprising of European universalism (very soon in the form of a 'modern' imperial project); and some intellectuals thought that 1989 – the bicentenary of the French Revolution! – would have signified its historical fulfilment.⁶ But, that same year, only some months earlier, Chinese tanks had been rolling on Tian'anmen Square, killing hundreds of demonstrators who were making a claim for democracy. Did those who were self-assured of the West not read the signs of a world that was actually turning against a specific idea of humanity?⁷ Today, we see more clearly that the fall of the Wall stands for an epistemic earthquake, which Lionel Ruffel (2016) has called the "brouhaha", a babble of voices of a world that can no more be grasped through universal concepts. A world that is characterised by a perduring present without pointing to a horizon of emancipation, without a clear utopia for an upcoming society, that would be based on the history of modern thought and the critique of a capitalist presence.

How could a complex story like this one be better addressed than in the form of a montage? – even though it certainly entails strong implications. European universalism has its deep philosophical sources long before the birth of Napoleon; in fact, they are to be found in Biblical monotheism and Greek thought. Such major historical phenomena as the 'fall of Granada', the conquest of the Americas and the Atlantic slave trade, Reformation and the Wars of Religion, have had a deep impact on European universalism long before Napoleon, the French Revolution, and the declaration of Universal Human Rights. Starting from this specific cut in time, we want to put emphasis here on a specific aspect of universalism that was again very visible in the Western reception and interpretation of 1989: its triumphant will to install a political world order.

⁶ Most prominently Fukuyama (1992).

⁷ Cf. on this the highly interesting dossier on Tiananmen testimonies and remembrances in *Cha. An Asian Literary Journal* (June/July 2019): <https://www.asiancha.com/wp/> (24 May 2020).

There are risks to our polemic framing. Even if, in an advanced field of writing and of curatorial work, constellation and montage are serious tools – not only for presentation, but for understanding (Ernaux 2008; Pamuk 2012; Hofmann 2017; Schubert 2018) –, the power of fragmentary, overlapping narration is highly contested in disciplines such as history, historical sociology, or philology. These seek, sometimes for good reasons, to produce linear connections.⁸ We are convinced though that the gain of this method can be bigger than what might get lost. To reconstruct the epoch of universalism by going back to decisive turning points is not only a historiographic effort in a narrow sense. To take the risk of putting aspects into constellation as a method is part of the critique of the epistemic and political dimensions of universalism. Even all the ‘posts’ of modernity are still part of the modern obsession to produce chronology and coherence forced by the major idea of progression (Ruffel 2016, 130). Instead, choosing some landmarks as points of departure, will make certain aspects visible without presuming too strongly the patterns we have learned to insert them into. This does not mean that historical order does not exist; and be it only in our heads, or in attempts of writing history. Restarting from some cases makes visible that concrete contexts always are in need to be linked to a general understanding through narrative procedures. They serve as points of departure from where an inquiry is launched into a greater symptomatic (de Certeau 1975; Ginzburg 1979; Revel 1996). The panorama that arises from the different landmarks shall create an impression of the complexity and paradoxes of what that could have been: the epoch of European universalism.

1769: Napoleon, Goethe, and the moment of Valmy

The “battle of Valmy” was the first major victory by the army of France during the Revolutionary Wars that followed the French Revolution (Fig. 1). The action took place on 20 September 1792 as Prussian troops attempted to march on Paris. They were stopped by General Kellermann, who thus achieved a huge psychological victory for the Revolution: monarchy was abolished over the next days and the Republic proclaimed. As a result, Kellermann was ennobled by Napoleon in 1808 and became the Duke of Valmy (Dufraisse 1990).

⁸ But see the contestations by Boucheron (2008) and Jablonka (2012).



Fig. 1: The Battle of Valmy, 20 September 1792, 1826, by Horace Vernet, National Gallery, London. Image: Wikipedia. https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Valmy_Battle_painting.jpg (10 June 2020).

The historiography of the Revolution portrayed the battle as the first victory of a citizen army, inspired by the ideals of 1789. Napoleon and Valmy: If Valmy is a decisive scene for the birth of European Modernity, then Napoleon can be considered its incarnation. He was seen not only as a person, but as an emblematic figure (Fig. 2). And he regarded himself thus. At the time of the battle, Napoleon was 23 years old. His portrait can be regarded as emblematic for the “generation Bonaparte”: The French historian Pierre Nora underlined the fact that with the Revolution, “youth appeared on the political scene in an eruptive way” (Savoy 2010, 155).

For Napoleon’s generation, the historical experience has been that of breakdown and acceleration. The mobility within society, a result of the Revolution, enabled spectacular careers of young men, of a generation bound together by the reception of works and projects of transnational reach: Kant and Rousseau; the reconstruction of antiquity and the interpretations of Republicanism; the interrogations of the origins of mankind; and the decoding of the rise and fall of civilizations.

The Revolution as the decisive point of reference for a generation: This idea was the starting point of the exhibition *Napoleon and Europe. Dream and Traumata* shown in 2010/2011 at two significant institutions: the Bundeskunsthalle in



Fig. 2: Napoleon Bonaparte on the Bridge at Arcole, 1796, by Antoine-Jean Gros, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Image: Wikipedia. [https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Gros_Antoine-Jean_-_Napoleon_Bonaparte_on_the_Bridge_at_Arcole_\(cropped\).jpg](https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Gros_Antoine-Jean_-_Napoleon_Bonaparte_on_the_Bridge_at_Arcole_(cropped).jpg) (10 June 2020).

Bonn and the Musée des armées at the Invalides in Paris. The opening constellation of the catalogue (Savoy 2010, 18–25) is telling: Framed by a photograph of Bonaparte’s personal copy of the *Code Napoléon* (Fig. 3) and by a portrait, showing Dominique-Vivant Denon, the emperors ‘eye’, charged to bring artworks from all over Europe to Paris during the Revolutionary Wars, the curator Bénédicte Savoy presents two different commentaries on the topic of the exhibition. The then-president of the Federal Constitutional Court, Jutta Limbach, and Pierre Rosenberg, director of the Louvre Museum, were asked to give brief answers to a some-



Fig. 3: *Code Napoléon*. Personal Copy, 1807, Imprimerie Impériale, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Code_Napoléon_Personal_Copy.jpg (10 June 2020).

what anachronistic question that was put to them: Why do they – or do not – like Napoleon? Both developed their judgement against a theoretical background, but also in a very subjective way. Jutta Limbach not only underlined the legal, but also the stylistic quality of the *Code Napoléon*, pointing out that Stendhal read a few pages of it every morning as a kind of exercise while writing his novels – law as literature. Pierre Rosenberg, whilst deploring the disintegration of the collections of the Louvre caused by the restitutions undertaken in 1815, declared himself in solidarity with the citizens of Venice (Fig. 4). Asked to characterise his personal relation to Napoleon, he made him responsible for the decline of the Venetian Republic.



Fig. 4: Apotheosis of Franz Joseph I of Austria, on the occasion of the return of the *Quadriga marciana* to Venice, 1815, by anonymous, Museo Correr, Venezia. Image: *Napoleon und Europa. Traum und Trauma*. Ed. Bénédicte Savoy. München, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel, 2010, 268.

The quadriga from Saint Marcus, brought to Paris on the orders of Napoleon in 1798, had been robbed by the Crusaders in Constantinople in 1204 and shipped to the *Serenissima*. When it was returned to Venice by the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph I it was again a political act, expressing the restitution of the Habsburg geopolitical order. As eclectic and subjective as these two reflections might be, they point out important aspects of the universal claim of a European modernity. Napoleon stands for both at the same time: deep admiration and irreconcilable hate.

Goethe was deeply impressed by Napoleon, and was, in fact, decorated with the “Légion d’honneur” by Napoleon in 1808 (Fig. 5). The Weimar-based writer, minister, and ‘public intellectual’ met with the emperor a total of four times. Napoleon is known to have read Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) not one or two, but a total of seven times, and to have been deeply impressed by it. Wilhelm von Humboldt reports in a letter that Goethe never left his house at Frauenplan



Fig. 5: Portrait of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 1822, by Heinrich Christoph Kolbe, Goethe-Nationalmuseum, Weimar. Image: Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Bestand Museen.

without putting on his medal, because it was such an immense source of pride to him (Seibt 2008). When talking about Napoleon, Goethe would also refer to him as “my Emperor” [“mein Kaiser”] (Savoy 2010, 159).

Goethe considered Napoleon to be the sign of the extraordinary, the symbiosis of *Geist* and *Macht*, spirit and power. In 1810, he had an audience with Napoleon. Deeply impressed, Goethe considered this honour as one of the milestones in his intellectual life. Twelve years later, he published a text that would be known under the title *Campaign in France in the Year 1792* (1822). As a part of his autobiographical project *Truth and Fiction relating to My Life* (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*, starting in 1809, final revision 1830), this prose combines reflections on contemporary history with his personal memories. Goethe, who had been present at the battle of Valmy with the Prussian army, summed it up in a famous sentence: “From this place and from this day forth commences a new era in the

world's history, and you can all say that you were present at its birth" (Goethe 1849 [1792], 81).

Less known perhaps is a scene that Goethe developed a few pages further. With the intention to change the depressed mood of emigrants and defeated soldiers, or so he says, he tells of the history of Saint Louis, crusader and role model of the good Christian Emperor. Just like Saint Louis, who had survived despite having been in great distress in Egypt, they would enjoy the same fate of survival. The fictional *auto-récit* finds its end in a poem, put down by Goethe on paper while travelling back from the battlefield. That is, at least, what the author wants us to believe. The moment of Valmy, characterised as a step into an unknown and thus widely open world order, is contrasted by a way of life lived in proximity and at home: "And, weary of long wandering to and fro / Muses at ease on life's continuous flow; / For still those venturous hearts that farthest roam / Return at last for happiness to home" (Goethe 1849 [1792], 298).⁹ Form the "farthest roam" a happy return "to home" – the open and the narrowness, Valmy and Weimar: If the story Goethe tells us was true, should the poem not be understood as a *prefiguration* of more conservative positions of the late Goethe, who had taken his distance towards the Revolution due to the fact that he himself had been too close to the violence caused by it (Seibt 2014)? Or should it be seen as a correction of a young man's emphasis, if the poem was not written at the time, but rather as a commentary on the Revolutionary Wars *ex post*? Whatever is true: In *Novel*, a short prose developed in 1827/1828 (Goethe 1981) that can not only be read as an aesthetic, but also as a social programme, Goethe points out the importance of harmony, of a structured order, and of the dream of a world unified under the sign of Christian – not modern – universalism. Herewith, he clearly modifies the admiration for Napoleon that he had expressed a few years earlier.

If many intellectuals of the "generation Bonaparte" were deeply influenced by the Revolution, like Hölderlin or Alexander von Humboldt, Hegel, born only a year after the French Emperor, shared Goethe's admiration for Napoleon. During his time as a young professor in Jena, Hegel wrote the following in 1806: "What a marvelous sentiment to see such a singular man, who is going to reach out and to dominate the world: sitting on horseback and being a point of concentration."¹⁰ Hegel, who identified the emperor with the "world's soul" ["Weltseele"], might have found his description represented in a painting by Heinrich and Ferdinand Olivier from 1807/1808, which is considered to be *the* iconic representation of Napoleon for the German Romantics, as Savoy points out (2010, 171). Yet, it is another

⁹ ["Und wie wir auch durch ferne Lande ziehn / Da kommt es her, da geht es wieder hin; / Wir wenden uns, wie auch die Welt entzücke, / Der Enge zu, die uns allein beglücke"].

¹⁰ Cited in Savoy (2010, 169; transl. F. H. and M. M.)

painting who would become emblematic for the reception of Napoleon in general: Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon crossing the Alps* (1800, painted in different variations till 1802). Ironically enough, it can be seen today at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the self-proclaimed first encyclopaedic museum of the Arab world. It is this painting that was also chosen in 1999 as a cover-picture for the Chinese translation of Emil Ludwig's successful and influent biography of Napoleon (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: *Lu-de-wei-xi, Na po lun zhua*, Chinese Edition of E. Ludwig's biography of Napoleon, Guangzhou 1999, using Jacques-Louis David's painting "Bonaparte crossing the Alps".
Image: *Napoleon und Europa*, op. cit., 30.

Indeed, not only the horse, and the emperor on horse-back, are linked to Roman models of representing power. The entire programme of power, summarised in the name of Napoleon, is actually following a Roman model: the unification of space and time, the integration of an Empire through law, infrastructure, a citizens' army, and language-politics. This can be understood analysing a relief at Napoleon's sarcophagus in the Dôme des Invalides, in which his body was buried in 1840 after being transferred from Saint Helena. It depicts a Roman emperor, with the allegories of the sciences and arts, presenting a list of his public constructions. This is also what the name Napoleon stands for. It represents the belief in progress, technical development, and welfare. Modernity is about the effort to structure space and mind, society and politics. The dome conceived by Jean

Nouvel for the Louvre Abu Dhabi echoes the dome of the Invalides as well as the Great Louvre, which was once renewed by president Mitterrand to underline the universalist presumptions of France, as they were represented by the museum from the very beginning. At the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a flat half globe structured in traditional Arabic patterns overwhelms the exhibition cubes, which are thought as a village, but are indeed part of a universalist, if not imperialist, infrastructure imposing a European (architectural) order to the world.

A picture of the courtyard of the Louvre, transformed into a museum in 1793, shows a telegraph pole on its roof (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Interior of the Louvre, 1799, by Charles Norry, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Image: BNF.

The first telegraph lines reaching the pole on top the Louvre were already commissioned in 1794; five were developed until 1833. To which purpose was this infrastructure installed? For the needs of an encyclopaedic museum? Surely not. Rather, for the communication with the army, the navy, or the heads of the new “départements”. The ideals of the Enlightenment and the universal claims of the French Revolution cannot be separated from the concept of empire, which is indeed a European, not merely a French dream. Looking back to Rome, this new empire is however linked to the idea of centralisation: From the very beginning

of the Revolution, Paris figures as the centre of power and the theatre of the obsessions of unity. “Napoleon” is the symbolic name of this history of domination, and Valmy is the symbolic site of the endeavours that the imperial universalism entailed. Except, this time, we are not referring to Valmy in France, but Valmy in Algeria (Fig. 8a and 8b).



Fig. 8a: Valmy (Algeria), Map of the Region. Image: Cercle algérianiste.



Fig. 8b: Postcard “Valmy. Le Marché de la Cité”. Image: diaressaada.alger.free.fr.

The history of the Algerian Valmy, El Kerma, today integrated into the agglomeration of Oran, can be studied as part of the French *mission civilisatrice*. Its history is going back to the *prise d'Alger* and the occupation of the region by the French in 1830. Under the name “Fig tree camp” this settlement, located in an area considered to be an empty, sparsely cultivated region, plays its role in both the military and the so-called ‘civil colonialisation’ of the country. In 1848, the camp is named *Valmy* by royal order to glorify the victory of the revolutionary army at Valmy on 20 September 1792 – and thus to assume the imperialist project of the Republic.¹¹ Astonishingly enough, even today, the history of El Kerma is presented as a tendentious story of (French) progress and (Arab) decline, which played its part in the Second World War and the liberation of France, but nothing relates to the Algerian War and the Independence of 1962:

Even if it kept its winegrowing and the market gardening [after 1945] Valmy is now no longer an agricultural village but a young and dynamic town. Its radiant future seems to point towards aviation, industrialisation and innovative technologies simply by its geographic localisation.

1962 decided differently for it. Valmy lost its population, its dynamics and even its name, once a synonym of victory.

(To be continued).

(Perez 1992, formatting kept as in the original).¹²

Valmy, symbol of the victories of the revolutionary army under the tricoloured flag and the ambitions that went along, was transformed by the protagonists of the Algerian independence into a symbol of the defeat of the imperial power – and thus of the dialectics of modernity itself.

1829: Champollion, or on deceived hopes

The Algerian Valmy would be part of the massive imperial project that the French invasion to Algerian territories announces for a very long 19th century. Whereas the French Valmy stands for a war of resistance (against the old European powers),

¹¹ This history can be studied in an article, published in 1992 in *L'Algérieniste*, available on the webpage of the French *Cercle algérieniste. Association culturelle des Français d'Afrique du Nord* (see Perez 1992).

¹² [Bien que gardant sa viticulture et son maraîchage (after 1945, the eds.), Valmy n'est plus un village agricole mais une jeune cité dynamique dont l'avenir, radieux, semble orienté du fait de sa position géographique, vers l'aviation, l'industrie et les techniques du futur. / 1962 en décidera autrement. Valmy perdra sa population, son dynamisme, et même son nom, synonyme de victoire. (A suivre)].

the Algerian Valmy stands for a turn of the resistance into a mission. This *mission civilisatrice* of the French Empire starts earlier, and points towards another area of North Africa conquered in 1798 by Napoleon Bonaparte: Egypt. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt integrates the Land on the Nile until today into a universalist concept of civilisation, namely *Francophonie*. Today, this concept, at least in its traditional understanding, provokes contestations and calls for a new order of relations and encounters. One very concrete such call took place between French President Emmanuel Macron and Alain Mabanckou in the French Pavilion on the Frankfurt Book Fair in autumn 2017 (Fig. 9).

Vis-à-vis the French President, Los Angeles-based author Mabanckou maintained that *Francophonie* no longer follows the logic of a centre and its peripheries: The 66 million French citizens should better integrate themselves into the big community of the 220 Million francophone speakers, and not inversely, because the francophone world would today be above all decidedly one thing: not French.¹³ In his Inaugural Lecture *Lettres noires* before the Collège de France



Fig. 9: Encounter between Emmanuel Macron and Alain Mabanckou, Frankfurt Book Fair 2017, French Pavilion, 10 October 2017. Image: Markus Messling.

¹³ See also the open letter that Alain Mabanckou (2018) published between two speeches on the status of the French language given by Macron: the first on the occasion of the official opening

(2016), Alain Mabanckou had demonstrated the enormous literary and cultural part that the African *Francophonie* plays in the history of encounter with the universal claim of the “France métropolitaine” and continued to develop a counter-narration at the very heart of French academia.

But the universalistic claim of the centre has very early on been reversed on itself. We know the story of the Haitian slave army that sang out the *Marseillaise* while confronting the French revolutionary army that was sent to maintain the colonial order (Buck-Morss 2000). This is the dialectics of modernity, which was conceived by Europeans themselves much earlier than is often thought. A wonderful example in this respect is Jean-François Champollion le Jeune, the glorified decipherer of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. His case is telling about the European awareness in times of imperial discourse.

Champollion was a fervent proponent of Bonaparte (Fig. 10). His career was deeply intertwined with the social mobility associated with the rise of Napoleon.¹⁴ Born under provincial circumstances, he soon lived under the responsibility of his elder brother Jacques-Joseph in Grenoble, who was part of a milieu that would enable the young Jean-François to study. Due to his enormous talent and ambitions, he learned quickly and was made a member of the Academy of Sciences of Grenoble right after he had finished the Lyceum. He went to Paris between 1807 and 1809 in order to study with the leading philologists of his time, such as Silvestre de Sacy.¹⁵ The Baron Silvestre de Sacy, dean of the rising European Oriental philology, an important player in the Restoration, would become a strong opponent to Champollion as the project of the deciphering of the hieroglyphs made progressively less credible the historical truth of the Bible and its narrative on humankind (cf. Messling 2015, 26). Champollion was called to a professorship at the newly founded University at Grenoble in 1810, being then barely 20 years old. In 1822 he writes his famous *Lettre à M. Dacier*, his letter to the Perpetual Secretary of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in which he suggested a first systematic phonetic understanding of the hieroglyphs (Champollion 1822). His grand coup was prepared through the epistemology of the *Idéologues*, and based on the very practical knowledge he received from Coptic exiles who had quit Egypt after the French defeat on the Nile, and from whom Champollion learned about the historical depth of Coptic and its link to earlier forms of writing (Mess-

of the Frankfurt Book Fair on 10 October 2017; the second one on 20 March 2018 at the Académie française. In his open letter, Mabanckou alludes to the personal encounter and repeats his claim for a new understanding of the notion of *Francophonie*.

¹⁴ Still the richest biography of Champollion is astonishingly enough the work of the German Egyptologist Hartleben (1906).

¹⁵ For de Sacy’s work and influence cf. Espagne, Lafi, and Rabault-Feuerhahn (2014).



Fig. 10: Portrait of Jean-François Champollion le Jeune, 1831, by Léon Cogniet, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean-François_Champollion,_by_Léon_Cogniet.jpg (10 June 2020).

ling 2016b). These forms of mobility, intellectual and practical, stand behind his “coup de génie”. It is rare to find another example that demonstrates as clearly the entanglement of education and social progress with such a rapidity and convincing result.

In 1826, Champollion becomes the Curator [*conservateur*] of the Egyptian department of the Louvre (Fig. 11). This is the time when the great European museums in London, Paris, Torino, and Berlin are in a race for Egyptian antiquities. To possess valuable Old Egyptian parts was seen as a proof of the validity to be a legitimate inheritor of the Empire, pushing the *translatio* back to the beginnings of Universal History in the Land of the Nile. When it comes to the concurrence with London, the other capital of the 19th Century, Champollion is a factor to be reckoned with. Thanks to his reputation, several great collections go to the



Fig. 11: Gravure of the first room of the Egyptian antiquities in the Louvre Museum, as it was designed by Champollion, 1863, by Augustin Régis for the travelguide “Nouveau guide de l'étranger et du Parisien” ed. by Adolphe Joanne. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egyptian_collection_Louvre.jpg (10 June 2020).

Louvre from 1826/1827 onwards (Messling 2015, 89). Champollion becomes *the* European expert of his times and writes surveys for acquisitions of many of the great museums.

We need to bear in mind the underlying epistemic structure of his rise to importance. Being of the post-revolutionary generation, Champollion believed in the notion of a *mission civilisatrice*, wherein France played a key role. Paris was considered the centre of modern civilisation – that is, for Champollion, a civilisation enlightened by science – where the beginnings of civilisation are revisited and integrated into the narrative of a great Universal History of humankind. In order to secure this human heritage, Champollion considered it legitimate – even necessary – to bring cultural goods from Egypt to the scientific centre – Paris –, where liberty, humanity, and science were represented in their most modern apogee. Champollion himself would bring back objects from Egypt, among them four mummies, a bas-relief of the Hathor-goddess, a sarcophagus of green basalt, and some sculptures. Champollion saw in the scientific discovery of the monuments an opportunity to save the antiquities from oblivion and natural decay. The scientific profit – with all the implications of the term – consequently was for him something entirely different than their destruction for commercial purposes

(Messling 2015, 103–111). This needs to be kept in mind in order to understand the contradiction between Champollion's argumentation for the conservation of the monuments and his actual practise. Champollion had already previously criticised the destruction of the Egyptian monuments by French activities, for example in a fierce polemic for the *Revue encyclopédique*, published in November 1821, through which he lambasted the transport of the Zodiac of Dendera to Paris.¹⁶ Its removal from the ceiling of the Dendera Temple had been requested by the collector Sébastien Louis Saulnier and, against the wishes of the Egyptian administration, was carried out by the French engineer Jean Baptiste Lelorrain. Champollion rightly accused them both of having destroyed the site (Messling 2015, 105).

It should also not be forgotten that Champollion depended for his Egyptological works on the collections in Europe until 1828. Demanding the appropriation of objects of knowledge for the production of universal knowledge, and the concentration of this knowledge in European metropolises, particularly in Paris, also contains a biographical logic. His journey to Egypt from August 1828 until November 1829 in some ways freed him of this dependency and allowed him to let his work be shaped by the decryption of the cultural goods and their conservation. When Champollion finally travels to the Nile in 1828, he is affected by the huge destructions he witnesses. The diary entries and letters, which Champollion wrote during his travels through the valley of the Nile to Nubia and back, are dedicated especially to the Egyptian monuments and inscriptions themselves. Time and again he remarked upon the destruction caused by nature and human interference of different sorts (Messling 2015, 106–107).

What is unsettling in all of this is how much Champollion himself pushed for findings. He spoke of his disappointment with his limited means and the efficiency of the excavations he commissioned. He advised his French compatriots again and again to acquire the obelisks of Luxor (Messling 2015, 106). Reading these contradictions, one is given the impression that Champollion was torn between the indignation about the destructions of the antique monuments and his desire to achieve his own important research results. Once, in a reflective mood, he asked himself in a letter to his brother Jean-Jacques, whether it was not already too late and his hasty travel to Egypt was therefore unjustified (Messling 2015, 107). Most likely, and paradoxically, this would have confirmed his conviction of the necessity to export the antiquities for scientific purposes. The amount of inscription-copies alone, either made by Champollion himself or commissioned by him, and about which he wrote incessantly in his letters to European interlocutors, speaks volumes about his perceived necessity to conserve as much as possible for science,

¹⁶ This passionate polemic is reprinted in Champollion (1987 [1909]: 154–157).

and for eternity. In November 1829, shortly before he embarked on his return journey to Europe from Alexandria – as if this was his idealistic legacy to the country – Champollion finally wrote his “Note” to the Egyptian viceroy Muhammad (Mehmet) Ali Pasha, in which he listed monuments and suggested measures of protection for them.¹⁷ To understand its importance, we need to go back to the structural backgrounds for a moment.

Certainly, many of the deals made with European Museums were made through self-declared ‘collectors’ like Henry Salt, Bernardino Drovetti, or Giovanni Battista Belzoni (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: “Drovetti 1816”, Bernardino Drovetti’s Signature in the Temple of Dendur. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image: Markus Messling.

But the description of the particularly remarkable paths of life of the central protagonists during the thriving early excavation phase should not cover up the fact that excavations and the ‘removal’ of monuments and art objects were big business in Egypt throughout the course of which countless Europeans and Egyptians hoped to become rich. Frédéric Cailliaud, travel companion to the French Consul General and collector Drovetti in Upper Egypt and at the time a geologist in the service of the viceroy Muhammad Ali Pasha, gives an impression of the dimen-

¹⁷ This “Note remise au Vice-Roi pour la conservation des monuments de l’Égypte” is reprinted in Messling (2015, 117–121).

sions of this gold-digger atmosphere in 1818 in his travel account *Voyage à l'oasis de Thèbes et dans les déserts situés à l'Orient et à l'Occident de la Thébàide*:

In Thebes, I found many Europeans who were involved in interesting excavations, in Kurna, in the ruins of Medinet Habu and in the *Memnonium*; the entire area of the ruins of Karnak was covered with dividing lines marking the terrain of the French, the English, the Irish, the Italians etc. European ladies were walking through the ruins, entered the catacombs, like all the other travellers. All of them sought to find or buy antiquities; no-one was worried about the heat or the effort; at any time of the day or night, travellers walked through the tombs or the plain. In the midst of this general zeal to satisfy their understandable curiosity or to discover overlooked antiquities, occasionally serious conflicts between the guides of several travellers of different nationalities arose, to the point where they even threatened each other at gun-point; fortunately, these conflicts went no further than that. I noticed that the Arabs quite liked these disputes, as they almost always ended to their advantage. Nowadays, there are not enough men for the excavations; that is why they also employ their women for the digging work in the catacombs: they incessantly roam the largest and the smallest tombs. And everyone, even their children from the age of nine, work tirelessly to carry the earth outside. This has become such an obsession that, if the *Kachef* or *Qaimaqam* did not force them to cultivate their fields, the Arabs would completely neglect their lands in order to devote themselves exclusively to the search for antiquities (Cailliaud [1821] 1862, 82; transl. Marko Pajević).

Thebes around 1820 was a particular case with respect to the intensity of excavations, but it shows that the excavations and openings of tomb chambers were not isolated projects by a few archaeologists in remote monuments of a large country, but rather represented a considerable international enterprise. Looking at the lists of the collections gives an impression of the 'profit' made in these undertakings: for Drovetti's first collection alone, the curator in charge of the Turin collection, Giulio Cordero di San Quintino, lists 169 papyri, 485 metal objects, 454 wooden objects, 1.500 scarabs, 175 statuettes, 102 mummies, 90 alabaster vases, and 95 statues (Messling 2015, 95–96). Cailliaud's report also uncovers the way in which these excavations were carried out. It is easy to imagine the considerable damage that was caused by this uncontrolled exploitation. This took place for the sake of quick money, but also in the name of science, which often enough caused the loss of precisely the knowledge it wished to conserve for humanity by salvaging the Egyptian antiquities – due to the destruction of the sites, lack of sketches and records, and inappropriate transport. Quite regularly, the meaning of objects could no longer be determined since the specific environment they had been embedded in – a temple, a tomb – could no longer be reconstructed, even though some museums tried. During the long transport routes, some objects simply got lost forever.

Comparable to natural history collections with their cabinets of species conserved in alcohol, the Egyptian collections were a material counterpart of the world famous *Description de l'Égypte* (Jomard et al. 1809–1829) which was in-

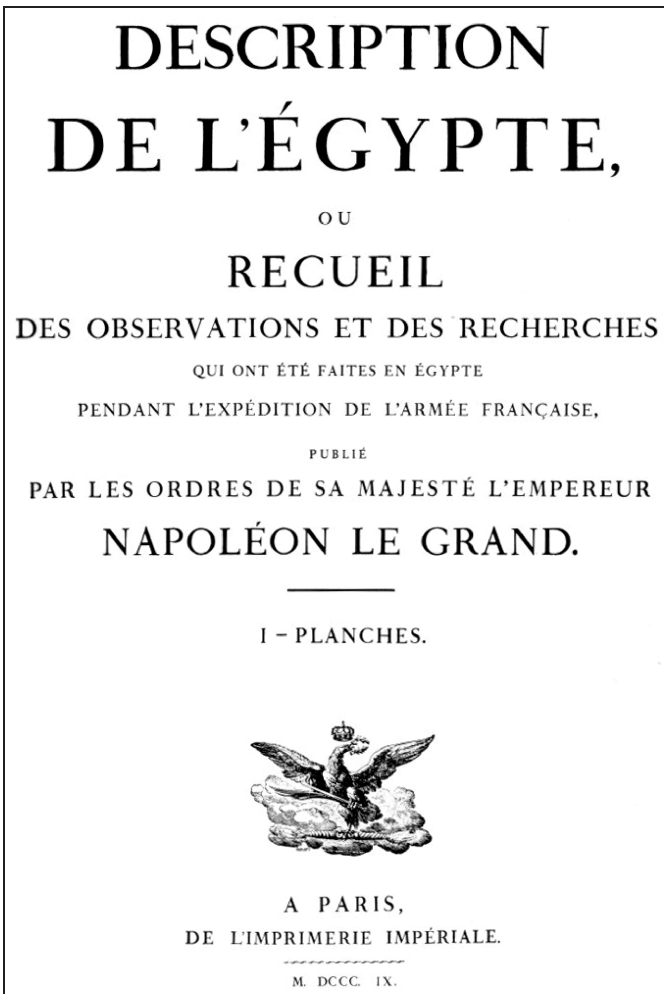


Fig. 13: *Description de l'Égypte*, title-page, first volume, 1809. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Description_de_l'Égypte_1.jpg (10 June 2020).

spired by the same notion of an exhaustive, historical and encyclopaedic description of the world: Egypt was to be completely appropriated in its antique and contemporary political, social, cultural, and geographic dimensions (Fig. 13).

To some extent, the history of this publication still resembles a fairy tale and illustrates the cultural and civilisational effectiveness of the enthusiasm for Egypt. It expresses more than just France's political longing for heritage and the renewal of human civilisation. Immediately after the military failure of the Egyptian campaign in 1802, Napoleon put to work a *Commission d'Égypte*, consisting



Fig. 14: *Description de l'Égypte*, housed in a custom-made display cabinet, inspired by the originals carpeted by Charles Morel and designed by Edme-François Jomard. Image: Sotheby's.

of ten persons, which were to produce a work for which special paper sheets, so called 'mammoth formats', new printing techniques, printing machines, and even a piece of furniture were invented (Fig. 14). Six printers were employed, as well as dozens of draughtsmen, engravers and clerks.¹⁸ In relation to the state budget, the estimated cost of 4.100.000 Francs, raised from diverse departments, probably still represents today one of the largest cultural projects of research and documentation of all times. It was the same claim to validity that carried the politics of collections.

Before this background, Champollion's letter to the Egyptian viceroy Muhammad Ali from 1829 is remarkable. In some few lines, he demands a regulation of the excavations and denounces the European looting. "The time has come to bring an end to these barbaric destructions", he takes the viceroy into responsibility, making the point that the objects belong to nobody if not humanity as a whole (Messling 2015, 120). Maybe his letter is a first document, in which a case is made for an 'international protection' of cultural goods from the perspective of a shared human heritage. It demonstrates that European imperial universalism becomes problematic to itself very early on, and acquires, in a dialectical turn towards its hegemonic implications, a true sense of humanity.

¹⁸ For a detailed description of the gigantic *Description de l'Égypte*, see Grinevald (2008).

From today's perspective, it is possible to level criticism at Champollion's note for different reasons. However, the attempt to limit the appropriation of cultural goods represents a significant rupture in the European awareness. In view of the dominant understanding of science and the world described above, this letter is a truly remarkable document, which highlights another aspect of the "great Champollion", as the nationalistic saying quickly went.

Champollion owed his advancement to Bonapartism, which he had defended fervently against the Restoration as a force that continued to pursue the goals of the Revolution; however, this did not blind him to the realities produced by it. His letter to Muhammad Ali represents an early, but very modern, document of international heritage protection. In its attempt to understand the world and humanity as part of a great History of Progress, anchored in the cultural capitals of Europe, Champollion's conception of Egyptian antiquity belongs to the universal aspirations of European modernity. Yet precisely because of its success, his project also reveals the cost of this aspiration, as it is there that the damaged world shows its resistance to this kind of appropriation. Rather than a hero, the famous Champollion statue at the Collège de France curiously appears, contrary to the artistic intention, to express scepticism as a result of its almost Rodin-like thinker-pose (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Statue of Jean-François Champollion, 1875, by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, Collège de France courtyard, Paris. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean-francois_champollion_bartholdi_statue.jpg (10 June 2020).

In such crisis-related reflections (in both senses of the word) lies, beyond progressivism, the deeper archive of European Enlightenment consciousness. This reflexivity is radically contemporary and politically relevant in its inability to subsume the ‘loss’ caused by universalism, as the inevitable ‘cost’ of it.

Are these dialectics relevant for our understanding of history? – considering the fact that we have to deal with the bitter truth of the hegemony of an imperial discourse starting in Champollion’s time under the flag of universalism.

1989, absolute West?

“Communism – that means Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country”. Lenin’s programmatic abbreviation from 1920 is still famous today. It not only became illustrated by the erection of monuments all over the country, but also as a kind of a pop-slogan even in times when the belief in the emancipatory dimension of technological progress was contested. Less known are the utopian accents he made explicit in his speech at the 8th *All-Russian Soviet Congress*:

We have to achieve, that each factory, each power-station becomes a site of enlightenment, and the day Russia will be covered by a network of electricity production units and of powerful technologic infrastructures, our communist economic development will become the paragon for an upcoming socialist Europe and Asia (Lenin 1959; transl. F. H. and M. M.).

This quote appears like an interpretation of the Russian Revolution of 1917 that combines the ambitions of Valmy and a *Nation universaliste* incarnating the liberation of the people, up to the *Commune de Paris*, with the concept of the empire at a time. The dialectics of modernity, first formulated as the programme of the French Republic and of a universalistic nation, was transferred into the international communist movement. This will soon establish its own empire. If Napoleon thought about a federal Europe at the same time as Kant developed his concept of a World Republic, the Communist Party translated the universalistic ideas and their relation to power into the Union of the Soviets and the programme of the Communist International.

Revolution and Restauration. One way led from Valmy to the idea of the social revolution; a second one to the national revolution. In opposition to the colonial reality of French politics which imposed a specific modernity to other European countries and the world, nationalisms were rapidly arising, right from the so called “Wars of Liberation” and late German Romanticism. In the perspective of a *longue durée*, the two world wars and also the ideological fundament of Western European integration after 1945 cannot be understood without the

Revolutionary Wars and the programme for which Napoleon stands; he, who became the Napoleon of the Invalides, the expression of the “grandeur de la France”.



Fig. 16: Adolf Hitler Looking Down on Napoleon’s Tomb at Dôme des Invalides, 28 June 1940, by Heinrich Hofmann, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin. Image: Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek.

In 1940, some hours only after the German Wehrmacht had reached Paris, Hitler visited Bonaparte’s sarcophagus (Fig. 16). Another translation was to be symbolised: The 19th century dreams of the Empire had to be transposed to the national-socialist vision of a Germanised Europe (Langewiesche 2008, 211–234). As for

many others, for the German communist exiles, the arrival of the Wehrmacht and the occupation of Paris turned into a nightmare. The dream of the social revolution as encouraged by the *Front Populaire* in 1936 was squashed.

Like many others, the Paris-based German communist and artist Max Lingner, who lived in France since 1929, found himself suddenly in exile. He was arrested and brought to the Camps at Gurs and at Les Milles near Aix-en-Provence. Lingner, who had worked before as press drawer for Barbusse's journal *Monde* as well as for *L'Humanité*, is known for being one of the emblematic artists of the *Front Populaire*, and, more specifically, of the *Fête de l'humanité*, a huge public feast organised by the communist press. But his monumental decorations, celebrating the working class and the idea of progress, have to be seen together with another part of his work, constituted by drawings of men and women, portraits in between typology and subjectivity, and of minimalist studies of the places they live in. His work as an artist and as a communist bound to partisan discipline can be interpreted through the dialects of modernity, as an expression of its promises and of disappointments. "À la recherche du temps présent – Auf der Suche nach der Gegenwart": a line taken from an autobiographic note, seems to be the programmatic concentration of Lingner's work (1945, 1). Before the occupation of France, Lingner had searched for his contemporaneity in the *banlieues*, in the proletarian suburbs of Paris. He did not only systematically organise the studies of urban sceneries in geographic patterns, but also with regard to the cardinal points: North, South, East, West. The sum of his drawings can be regarded as a worldview without a centre. His universalism is a universalism of a universal class, of workers and their party, and not of the *Nation universaliste* with its capital and great monuments.

After the liberation of Europe, the hope for a social revolution through a communist future made him move back to Germany. Lingner returned to Berlin in 1949 and became one of the most representative artists of the German Democratic Republic. In order to participate at the foundation of a new art and renewed art history in line with the hopes and the ideology of the communist movement, Lingner made a symbolic donation to the German people, handing over 40 paintings, aquarelles, and drawings he brought back from France to the National Council. They were presented in an exhibition opened by Wilhelm Pieck, then-president of the Council. Hence, they were from the very beginning entangled with the political representation of what would soon become the GDR.

In 1950, Lingner designed the famous decorations for the International Labour Day Parade (1 May) at Berlin's Lustgarten (Fig. 17). His intention was to transform the historical centre of the city into a place of festivity and into a forum of an emerging people's democracy.



Fig. 17: Otto Grothwohl standing on the official tribune underneath Max Lingner's wall painting "Völkerfreundschaft" (*Friendship amongst the peoples*), 1 May 1950. Image: Max Lingner. *Das Spätwerk (1949–1959)*. Ed. Thomas Flierl. Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 70.

Therefore, he transformed the architectural symbol of the Prussian feudalism, the Berliner Schloss, together with Schinkel's Neues Museum, into representations of a universal solidarity of the people (Flierl 2013a). But Lingner's hopes were disappointed just a few months later. As he had returned to Berlin from Paris instead of Moscow, the professor and academy member was considered a suspect by the Russians. Close to president Grotewohl, who was then attacked by Wal-

ter Ulbricht, Lingner found himself under fire: His style was criticised as an expression of Western formalism and his portraits of workers were considered to not be “German enough” (Lingner 1955, 64). Designated to create the emblematic *Berliner Wandbild* at the former fascist Ministry of Aviation [*Reichsluftfahrtministerium*] that had been transformed into a central government building of the GDR, he had to re-elaborate his propositions several times to adapt composition and expression according to the ideological programme. The monumental relief mural, realised in noble Meissen porcelain, illustrates the communist ideal of a free society and of a – national – universalism. Frustrated by the fact that his art was not appreciated, Lingner took refuge from contemporary social life, working on historical paintings such as *Der grosse Deutsche Bauernkrieg*. Celebrating the peasant war of 1524 allowed him to express his partisan convictions and, following the doctrine of his party, to continue to sketch faces and expressions of men in preparatory studies. His artistic search for a contemporary socialist realism was now turned into something different: What would be a typical *German* socialist realism inspired by old German masters such as Grünewald or Altdorfer?

Lingner died in 1959, two years before the GDR closed the border to West Berlin. His work became petrified as part of the official state art, but nonetheless kept the force to remember another history of socialism in art, as it showed up in its connection to Paris and to the *peuple de gauche* in France. Of course, the latter aspect was banned in the pictorial language of the ‘official’ social realism. Still, as soon as in 1965, a small publication edited by the German Academy of Arts at Berlin [*Deutsche Akademie der Künste zu Berlin*] celebrated *Max Lingner in Paris*, presenting under this title his French drawings, which had been brought to Moscow during the war. Through this publication, the making of the artist and communist Lingner in France was appreciated, as well also his artistic and political experience. Lingner himself had related his French experiences in a short autobiographical prose and summed up in the portrait of *Yvonne*, an ephemeral love first met at the Louvre museum, remembered as the later activist in the communist resistance, who was deported to Auschwitz and subsequently killed (Lingner 1949). In 1989, in a trembling state, some months only before the Berlin Wall came down, the French Lingner was once more cherished by an important exhibition organised by the National Academy of Arts and the National Gallery: *Max Lingner. 1888–1959*. It was accompanied by a special edition of stamps, symbols of state sovereignty, and universal *Bilderfahrzeuge* (Aby Warburg) – miniscule transport vehicles for images. Among the motives chosen for the stamps was *Yvonne* (Lingner 1988, 73). Yet no attention was given to the monumental mural relief, celebrating the foundation of the GDR, one of the contested works of Max Lingner that can still be seen today in Berlin right on the facade of the Federal Ministry of Finance

[*Bundesfinanzministerium*]. If a Lingner exhibition marked the beginnings of the GDR in 1949, another one pointed to its end.¹⁹

1989. The end of the social utopia, the end of History? In his famous essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Francis Fukuyama writes:

From the beginning, the most serious and systematic attempts to write Universal Histories saw the central issue in history as the development of Freedom. History was not a blind concatenation of events, but a meaningful whole in which human ideas concerning the nature of a just political and social order developed and played themselves out. And if we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must also take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end (Fukuyama 1992, 51).

Fukuyama is often understood superficially. What is meant here, is certainly not that historical movement in the sense of an enchainment of historical events would come to an end. He rather considered the post-1989 situation as a *conditio humana* in which no serious intellectual and political alternative to Western universalism – which means for him: to capitalism and liberal democracy – seemed to remain. But even this philosophical perspective was wrong, and we see it with striking clarity today. It was wrong, because the counter-modern current with its specific entanglement of progressivism and reactionary politics gains in all Western societies in power and pushes the importance of freedom back behind other principles like homogeneity or belonging. It also showed to be wrong, because, whilst Fukuyama claims that “capitalism flourishes best in a mobile and egalitarian society”, 1989 announced the fact that capitalism can well live without democratisation (Ther 2019; Balibar 2020, 193–212). Moreover, the ‘world’ was expressing the fact that freedom was not at all necessarily linked to Western universalism. The anti- and decolonising movements had done this for decades – just think of the example of Frantz Fanon who gave up his position as a psychiatrist in Algeria at the moment he was convinced that the wounds of his patients

¹⁹ Thirty years after the Berlin Wall came down, Lingner’s art was stored in the museum-depots and barely visible. Therefore, in 2019, an exhibition at the Institut Français de Berlin organised a ‘rediscovery’ of the artist and discussed his realism and legacy. The exhibition *Max Lingner. Auf der Suche nach der Gegenwart* (curated by F. Hofmann and R. Melis) pointed out the failed image-transfer from France to Germany and from the former GDR into the reunified German society. Widely unknown to former West-German citizens, Lingner’s work endures to be an important part of the contested East-German culture, of the state history of the GDR, and of the memories of its former citizens. An augmented version of this exhibition was shown in Paris at the Musée de l’histoire vivante in 2020 (Hofmann 2019).



Fig. 18: Poster “Imperialism and Revolution: Who was Frantz Fanon?”, May 2017, London. Image: Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Who_was_Frantz_Fanon,_London_May_2017.jpg (10 June 2020).

would not be healable within a colonial system oriented towards the needs of the colonisers only (Fig. 18).²⁰

And in the wake of the decolonisation, the literatures of the world painted already in 1989 another picture of the times by pointing to a multi-polar, diverse world. It is another historical concomitance, that in 1989 the famous book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989) is published in London, the ancient heart of another imper-

²⁰ See Fanon (2018 [1956]), and for the background on Fanon’s letter to the “Ministre Résident”: Mbembe (2016, 119–139).

ial universalism. Today, intellectuals claim that progressive visions of the future cannot simply mean a mimicry of possible Western achievements, but have to be thought beyond, in a truly ‘global’ perspective – be it, for instance, from an African contemporary (Sarr 2016, 123–131; Mbembe 2013b, 257–263), or be it with regard to the transformations in the Arab world (Dakhli 2009; Kerrou 2018, 149–172).

Maybe those who believed less in the force of the Spirit, as Fukuyama did, saw more clearly, already in 1989. In his text *The Beech and the Birch. An Essay on the European sadness* (2009), Camille de Toledo writes:

The spirit always forgets the body of the being. It doubles the body with high speed, and disdains all forms of inertness. It runs like the hare in order to celebrate the end, bends itself under the new conditions of the present, goes through metamorphoses, takes notice of the new facts about the world, interprets them. It shouts: ‘The Wall has fallen! The Wall has fallen!’, aligns itself to the antitotalitarian excitement, to the triumph of what we obsessively define as *Freedom*. And doing so, the hare forgets the turtle, the weight, the endurance of the past, its capacity to survive the event that strikes it. The spirit does not see the appalled faces of all those for whom freedom is one of these words which are stowed away in the libraries of hope... The spirit did not see, during and after the Berlin Wall came down, the sadness (de Toledo 2009, 15; transl. M. M.).

The impression de Toledo gets from the falling Berlin Wall is a tragic one, recalling the famous picture of the master Mstislav Rostropovich playing Bach on his cello at Checkpoint Charlie (Fig. 19). Whereas the original TV-films are colourful and reveal that many people actually gathered around the Soviet dissident, the black and white photography, rich in contrast, stresses the rough aspect of the Berlin of that time and casts a cloud of gravity over the scene. Rostropovich, self-absorbed, seems to be distanced from the world and from the people. De Toledo tells that some passers-by, who did not recognize the master Rostropovich, threw some coins to him. Behind him, on the Berlin Wall, a great painting of a wily Mickey Mouse. Next to it some writings like “Charlie’s retired”, or a crossed out “~~Øst~~” (*East*). What an image for the new regime of freedom! Europeans did not listen to the world, the image says. They were inebriated by an idea of freedom that was reflecting themselves without considering a wider context. As long as Europeans do not see the necessity to set themselves into a new relation with those who had barely tasted freedom, they will not be able to see an option for a world of the future. This loss of a utopian perspective is due to the fact that Europeans have lost their ‘Other’ as a point to which they can transcend. But they did not only lose the ‘Other’ in the sense of another modern system (state socialism, communist internationalism). After 1989, the ‘West’ also forgot those who did not profit from the system change. Europeans forgot the losses that were still in the world, in the Eastern hemisphere, and, since long, in the Global South – not to forget the social problem within Western societies. The unlimited capitalism generally and more



Fig. 19: Mstislav Rostropovich performs some pieces by Bach at Checkpoint Charlie in celebration of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, 10 November 1989. Image: Reuters.

and more raised the question of justice and relation. As if the Europeans were enclosed in themselves. As if they had lost the empathy that would allow transcendence, liberation towards a desirable humanity. That is why large parts of European societies ensconced in a mode of melancholia which Camille de Toledo calls the “*tristesse européenne*” (2009, 25–30).

After the horrors of the 20th century, the power of the Enlightenment idea of progress had already come to a certain end. European self-understanding was now to be grasped from its negativity: Never again such crimes against humanity. Or, as de Toledo describes it, the “negative universal” (2009, 102–105). Europe was building on values that consisted in what it did not want to be. The demo-

cratic public culture that was born from it was taken for the foundations of humanity. But unfortunately, the lessons of history did not encompass colonial history. It concentrated on the crimes committed against Europeans. This ‘loss’ of the world was fortified when the utopian ‘Other’ broke away in 1989. But in the return to a ‘blank reality’, it also became much more visible. Other groups of victims of European politics were getting a voice. As the cultures of remembrance were fixed in stone memorials and other remembrance marginalised, a struggle emerged which continues in terms of an ethnicisation of representation.²¹ “Sadness to see”, writes de Toledo, “that what could have been born from the ‘negative universal’ (the link between Sartre, Fanon, and Améry) is again subject to contestation, concurrence, and the struggle for recognition” (2009, 105; transl. M. M.).

Therefore, if 1989 was the end of a European 20th century, it needs to be an opening to the world. Histories need to be told together to avoid “hierarchies of pain” (de Toledo 2009, 205). That is the force of the narration: To the contrary of memorials and historical sites fixed in stone, narrations can entangle histories. To connect, or even entangle the histories of suffering of modernity carries an ethic dimension, but, moreover, makes it necessary to reflect the own standpoint from where a narration shall be constructed.²² The lessons of the 20th century should not be put to an end, but rather woven into a common “negative universal” that can serve as a moral fundament of a world-society. It entails questions of reparation, justice, and forgiveness. In this shared universal, humanity may find a utopian dimension for its living-together – without centralising and without making abstraction of particularities any more. Time to overcome the obsessions and to get to an end with the European *tristezza*.

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²¹ See the recent global debate on German remembrance politics during which numerous articles, essays and manifestos have been published; cf. the central statement by Achille Mbembe, “Lettres aux Allemand_e_s” (Mbembe 2020b).

²² Werner and Zimmermann have stressed the importance of reflexivity in their widely received article on the “histoire croisée” (2006).

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